

Australia's peak union body rules out opposition to Howard government's agenda

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In a display of abject grovelling, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Sharan Burrow this week declared that the unions would do nothing to oppose the anti-working class agenda of the reelected Howard government. The Liberal-National Party Coalition was returned to office on October 9 and is poised to gain control of the Senate, clearing the way for a raft of regressive legislation. This will include further deregulation of the labour market and a renewed onslaught against workers' rights.

Following a special meeting of union leaders in Melbourne on October 18 to discuss the election result, Burrow told the media that despite "widespread dissent" in the union movement, "at this point in time, we don't have any plans to actually respond to the prime minister's agenda with industrial activity". Instead, the unions would merely, "talk to the community about what the extreme measures of the Prime Minister will mean to the lives of working Australians".

Burrow went on to legitimise the government's claim that it had a mandate for attacking the working class, declaring that Howard had "gone to the election with these measures". She appealed to the prime minister to "tread carefully" and "not use his election mandate to the full". Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) national secretary Doug Cameron joined Burrow in insisting that "unions should not overreact to the election result".

The "extreme measures" alluded to by Burrow—and against which the ACTU and the unions have signalled they will not lift a finger—include:

- * The removal of the present "unfair dismissal laws" from small businesses with fewer than 20 employees, and measures "to protect small business from redundancy payments". While the unfair dismissal laws are totally inadequate from the standpoint of protecting workers' rights, the proposed changes will strip many thousands of

workers of even minimal protection, allowing employers to sack them at will.

- * The introduction of an "Independent Contractors Act" to "enhance and encourage independent contracting". The Act will preclude anyone seeking orders from the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) "which would impose limits, constraints or barriers on the operation of contractors". The measure will remove any impediment to companies increasing the use of contract labour to downsize and undermine the conditions of their permanent workforce.

- * A further reduction in the number of "allowable conditions" for inclusion in work agreements. The previous reduction to just 22 items permitted employers to jettison a raft of working conditions once enforceable under past awards.

- * The introduction of a "mediation service" and measures enabling the Industrial Relations Commission to suspend industrial action over new enterprise work agreements to "allow for a cooling off period and resumption of work" while mediation takes place.

- * Lifting the present three-year limit on the duration of enterprise work agreements, allowing for five-year contracts to effectively lock in wages and conditions for a longer period.

- * Extra funding to strengthen the Office of Employment Advocate (OEA) to assist employers to more rapidly ratify and impose Australian Workplace Agreements (individual work agreements) on their employees.

- * Further restrictions on the right of union entry to work sites, including requiring union officials to comply with employers' "requests" regarding where discussions with union members will take place.

- * Measures to strengthen the secondary boycott provisions of the Trades Practices Act to outlaw all sympathy strikes and to restrict industrial action only to issues pertaining to negotiations for enterprise

agreements.

* Compulsory secret ballots before strike action, even during so-called “protected” periods during negotiations for enterprise work agreements.

Burrow’s claim that the election result gave the government a mandate for its far-reaching industrial relations agenda is nothing but an attempt to justify the ACTU’s own capitulation before Howard. In fact, Howard did not run a high profile campaign on industrial relations, because he knew the changes would be deeply unpopular with large sections of the population. After an initial airing to reassure big business, industrial relations was shunted to the background and Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews was left to outline the government’s policies to a low-key gathering.

The truth is, and Burrow knows it, working people have never endorsed the dismantling of their hardwon conditions or industrial rights in any election, and have attempted to fight every move in that direction by both Liberal and Labor governments. Responsibility for the absence of a broad, vocal and active movement against the present government’s proposals lies squarely with the ACTU and the unions, which have acted on every occasion to suppress all opposition.

When masses of workers rallied in Canberra in 1996 and stormed parliament in opposition to Howard’s first budget and the reactionary Workplace Relations Act, the ACTU condemned their action and closed down the official campaign. The peak union body then joined the Australian Democrats to negotiate slight amendments to the Act, clearing its passage through the Senate.

Since then, the unions have worked to break up and channel workers’ opposition into appealing to minor parties in the Senate to block regressive legislation. With this strategy now blown to pieces, the union bureaucracy is desperately seeking a niche for itself in the new political and industrial climate to ensure that it remains in the loop as labour broker and industrial policeman.

Burrow’s comments indicate that the unions are preparing to deepen their collaboration with the employers to deliver new levels of “flexibility” and “productivity”. With just months to go before the control of the Senate officially passes to the Coalition, they are already considering offering to negotiate with employers for work agreements with a longer expiry date—in line with one of the changes in Howard’s IR package.

At the same time, the unions have not ruled out more direct cooperation with the Howard government itself. Just days after the election, the national secretary of the

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) John Maitland told the media that while he did not think his union could work with Howard it was “not because we don’t want to”.

Maitland went on: “We will do so if the Government is prepared to embrace its international obligations (and honour) the conventions on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining”. In other words, the union bureaucracy is prepared to offer its services if it is assigned a place in the official framework. The decision by the ACTU and its affiliates on October 18 to rule out industrial action against the government is simply a downpayment or “an act of good faith”.

Despite Howard’s vitriolic “union bashing”, the prospect of a closer relationship with sections of the union bureaucracy is not at all unreal. During the course of the election, the CFMEU’s Tasmanian branch rallied timber workers in support of Howard when he pledged to continue the logging of old growth forests.

While the media has depicted Howard as invincible, more astute sections of the corporate elite are acutely aware that his government has relied on the unions to contain the working class. In 1998, when the government bungled an attempt to exclude the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) from the waterfront, embroiling itself in a legal wrangle, the ACTU moved in to pull Howard’s coals from the fire and disperse the mass movement that had emerged in response to the attack. The MUA then delivered the sweeping job cuts and massive increases in productivity demanded by the government and the stevedoring companies.

The government and employers share a common concern with the unions. Conscious that the anger and resentment of millions of ordinary working people can find no expression through official channels, they all fear that it will emerge in the form of a mass movement outside their control. It was possibly with this in mind that Workplace Relations Minister Andrews let it be known last week that the government was open to overtures from the unions, declaring that his door was “always open to the ACTU” and that its secretary Greg Combet “is always welcome to talk to me”.



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